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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/AGS

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SUBJECT: Merkel Under Pressure in Germany's Southwest

Sensitive but unclassified; not for internet distribution.

¶1. SUMMARY: No clear predictions can be made in Germany's southwest states as to which parties will prevail in the upcoming federal election. Polls show that the Christian Democrats (CDU) have lost ground in Baden-Wuerttemberg (B-W), typically a CDU stronghold, however have gained slightly in Rheinland-Pfalz, making the overall situation somewhat of a wash. The Social Democrats (SPD) also lag in the three states discussed in this cable, Hesse, Rheinland-Pfalz, and Baden-Wuerttemberg, while the smaller parties, primarily the Greens and Free Democrats (FDP), are making up their losses. Voter turnout due to malaise and dissatisfaction with the Chancellor Merkel also may be an issue. END SUMMARY.

Considerable Unrest in Baden-Wuerttemberg CDU

¶2. The latest poll publicized 10 days before the national elections caused shock waves in the B-W CDU. The B-W Christian Democrats are presently at 34% of the popular vote, a decline of 5.2% compared to ¶2005. Although leading B-W Christian Democrats downplayed the results in public statements calling them "snapshots", the shock goes deep. For the southwest CDU, typically one of the strongest CDU areas in the country, this result would be a historic low. B-W CDU Secretary General, Thomas Strobl, and CDU caucus chief Stefan Mappus have publicly called upon the rank and file to mobilize. Strobl also indirectly criticized the campaign of Chancellor Merkel, which focused more on her as a candidate than on party policies. Regional dissatisfaction with Merkel is attributed to the impression that she sided with VW over the Baden-Wuerttemberg based Porsche during the Porsche-VW deal. An imprudent joke she made last year about southwest German accents also continues to anger some CDU members who view her as a Northerner who does not understand them.

¶3. While the outlook for the CDU is poor, the B-W Social Democrats are not faring much better. The SPD has dropped by 8.1% down to 22%, the worst result in the last 56 years. Deputy SPD Caucus Chief Nils Schmid told Consulate representatives that Foreign Minister Steinmeier's strong showing in the televised debate has helped, but they need two more weeks of campaigning to make up votes. The smaller parties in B-W are benefiting. The FDP polled at 18%, up 6.1% from 2005 election, the B-W Greens at 15 % (up 4.3%) and the Left Party at 7% (up 3.2%). FDP contacts say that they want to prove that they are the third strongest party in Baden-Wuerttemberg on Sunday.

SPD Party in Rheinland-Pfalz Struggling

¶6. Reports from Rheinland-Pfalz (R-P) indicate that the SPD is also struggling there. Polls place them at 28% (down 6.6% compared to 2005), the lowest ever since 1953. CDU party chief, Christian Baldauf, stated that he views these results as an indication that the SPD's predominance in the state is coming to an end, after it has been the governing party there since 1991. The CDU, however, and the smaller parties, FDP, Greens, all show gains. The CDU in

particular is polling at 39%, which is up 3.9% from 2005. Current polls put the FDP at 14%, Greens at 8% and the Left at 7%.

SPD in Hesse Still Recovering

¶7. In Hesse, the SPD is also struggling after the loss of credibility it experienced last year when party leader Andrea Ypsilanti tried to form a coalition government with the Left Party and failed. The Hesse SPD Party currently is hoping for 25% (as opposed to the 35.6% it reached in 2005). According to a senior SPD party official, many Hesse SPD members feel angry with the national SPD Chair Franz Muentefering, whom they think encouraged Ypsilanti's failure in 2008. He expects Muentefering to fail in national politics due to dislike for him in the party.

¶9. The ruling CDU party currently expects around 34% of the vote (33.7 in 2005), according to a high ranking official in the Hesse State Chancellery. The CDU fears low voter turnout, however, in part because, as per this official, Chancellor Merkel has alienated some of the Catholic, conservative base. The FDP Caucus Chief in Hesse, Florian Rentsche, echoed this sentiment. Although the FDP expects a respectable 11 to 14% in Hesse (11.7% in 2005), Rentsche doubts that a CDU-FDP coalition will be possible because of CDU members not voting. He additionally says that the Chancellor has lost some of her conservative base by being too liberal and that she's also perceived by local members as too "Northern."

¶10. The Greens hope to gain on Sunday due to the SPD losses. Their Hesse Chair Tarek al-Wazir told Consulate representatives that he expects the Greens to have the third strongest showing with 12% (10.1% in 2005).

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¶11. COMMENT: Regional issues do play a role in influencing how Germans will vote on Sunday. However, it is not clear that indications from our district, including dissatisfaction with Chancellor Merkel and the possibility of low voter turnout, will be strong enough to upset the status quo: Merkel as the candidate favored to stay in power. END COMMENT

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